

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 3, 2014 at 10:33am

The top five under-covered Catholic stories of 2013

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All Things Catholic

It's an "All Things Catholic" tradition to dedicate the first column of the new year to the most under-covered Catholic stories of the previous 12 months, which in the past has always seemed a good use of time given the sporadic and often radically incomplete coverage the church typically draws.

This year, however, it feels a little silly to be talking about Catholicism as under-covered, given the astronomic media interest generated by the resignation of Benedict XVI and the rise of Francis.

If the coverage we've seen this year isn't enough, one might fairly ask, what exactly would be?

Yet an ironic aspect of the "Francis effect" is that it's actually become tough to tell any other Catholic story on most media platforms because whatever appetite there is for church news is entirely fed by pope-mania. Even coverage of Francis himself has left some important pieces of the story in the shadows, often focusing on stylistics and personality rather than substance.

As a result, there are a surprising number of narratives that slipped through the cracks, despite the fact it sometimes feels like the world's commercial networks are becoming satellites of Vatican TV.

For purposes of this countdown, I'm omitting already-familiar storylines that have temporarily been shoved to the backburner -- the sex abuse crisis, for instance, or the crackdown on American nuns, or controversy in the States over the Obama contraception mandates. They were amply covered before and doubtless will be again.

Instead, I focus on five storylines that never really had much traction, especially in American and English-language media, and that are worth another look.

5. Allam and heartburn for ideologues

The highest-profile Catholic convert during the Benedict years was Magdi Cristiano Allam, an Egyptian-born politician and essayist who rose to fame in Italy as a fierce critic of radical Islam. Allam was personally received into the church by Benedict XVI during the 2008 Easter vigil Mass, but announced in late March that he considered his allegiance "expired" because of a "softer" line on Islam under Francis.

Allam published an essay adding four additional reasons for his defection: what he called the built-in "relativism" of Catholicism, its inherent tendency to "globalism" (instead of defending Western culture and values), its "do-gooder" streak, and its imposition of unrealistic teachings on sex and money.

Aside from the debatable fourth point, Allam was basically right on the first three.

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Although Catholicism has teachings it considers anything but relative, it encompasses a variety of interpretations and expressions of those teachings. Catholicism is inherently global, ever more so in a time when two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics on the planet live outside the West, and it also does have a gaggle of do-gooders. Whether that adds up to a reason to spurn the church is, of course, a different matter.

In itself, the loss of Allam wouldn't crack any list of the year's major Catholic developments, even in Italy. In all honesty, his on-again, off-again conversion probably did more damage to his own credibility than to the church's missionary fortunes.

However, there's a moral to the story that gives it larger significance.

What it illustrates is that anyone drawn to Catholicism primarily on the basis of political considerations, whether they come from the right or the left, is destined to be frustrated. Catholicism simply isn't a political party, and it has enough internal diversity to give ideologues of any stripe a serious case of heartburn.

Among other things, this suggests a word to the wise for anyone feeling a tug toward Catholicism today because of perceptions that it's moving to the left under Francis. Take the Allam story to heart because if your faith is based on no more than a political wish list, it may have a short shelf life.

4. The church's Italian problem

It's possible that the influence and reputation of the Italian bishops reached a new low in 2013.

One sign came in national elections in February, when both the Vatican and the Italian church wrapped technocratic Prime Minister Mario Monti in a warm, loving embrace, yet Monti barely drew 10 percent of the vote and finished in an embarrassing fourth place. While Monti had political handicaps of his own, it's striking how little difference the bishops' support meant.

Here's another: The headline of a recent national poll about which institutions Italians trust was that the church has gained 10 points since the election of Francis. However, that bump brought its trust level up to just 54.2 percent, meaning fully half of the country remains skeptical. (For the record, the church finished well behind Italy's forces of order.)

Say "church" to most Italians and they think "bishops," so in effect, the survey was a referendum on the hierarchy.

Even more telling, ambivalence about Italian churchmen wasn't just found at the grassroots, but perhaps even more strongly within the College of Cardinals.

In effect, the conclave of 2013 was the most antiestablishment papal election of the last 100 years, fueled by a strong sense among prelates outside *il bel paese* that the Italian old guard had run the Vatican off the rails. The leaks debacle was the final nail in the coffin, but it was hardly the only one.

Here's why this matters for Catholics in other parts of the world.

For centuries, the Italian episcopacy has formed the church's central nervous system. They supply the vast majority of the Vatican's diplomatic corps and a disproportionate share of the place's other movers and shakers. Prelates from major Italian dioceses, such as Milan, Bologna, Florence, Venice and Genoa, are points of reference around the world, and the Italian bishops' conference, CEI, is a major tone-setter for other groupings of bishops.

A slow-moving internationalization of church leadership perhaps makes the Italian contribution less critical than once upon a time, but as long as the Vatican remains in Rome, as long as future generations of churchmen study there and absorb the rhythms of Italian ecclesial culture, and as long as Italian is the *de facto* working language of the church, the overall health of the Italian episcopacy will be relevant indeed to Catholic fortunes.

One measure of the "Francis effect" thus profiles as his ability to lead a renewal of the hierarchy in his own backyard.

One step in that regard came Monday, when Francis named Bishop Nunzio Galantino the new secretary of the Italian bishops' conference while allowing him to serve part-time while remaining in his diocese.

Galantino is seen as cut from Francis' cloth, known in his small southern diocese for living in a small room at the seminary rather than the bishop's palace, keeping his own calendar and answering his own phone rather than having a secretary, driving himself in a simple car, and insisting on being called "Don Nunzio" rather than "Your Excellency." When Galantino was made a bishop, he asked people not to give him gifts but to donate to the poor.

A typical Francis footnote is that he wrote to the people of Galantino's diocese to "ask permission" to borrow their bishop, saying, "I know you won't like that he's being taken away, and I understand," and then asked them to "forgive me." If not unprecedented, it's certainly rare for a pope to apologize in such a direct way to the people affected by a personnel move.

3. A new patron for Christian martyrs

One unfortunate side effect of the fact that popes generally no longer preside over beatification ceremonies is that people don't pay as much attention, which caused the May 25 beatification of Fr.

Giuseppe "Pino" Puglisi, the great anti-Mafia priest of Sicily gunned down in 1993, to pass largely without comment.

I wrote at the time that it was the most important beatification of the early 21st century, and I'm sticking by that diagnosis.

That's because Puglisi is an ideal patron saint for today's new generation of Christian martyrs. The number of Christians killed for reasons linked to their faith is approximately 100,000 every year, with millions more facing other forms of violent persecution. Puglisi is a compelling symbol not just because he's one of them, but because his beatification represents a key theological breakthrough in how Catholicism understands the concept of martyrdom.

Puglisi was pastor of San Gaetano Parish in the rough-and-tumble Palermo neighborhood of Brancaccio. He became famous for his strong anti-Mafia stance, refusing to take their money for feast day celebrations and not allowing dons to march at the head of processions. He received multiple death threats and, according to the testimony of one of his hit men (who later confessed), Puglisi's last words were: "I've been expecting you."

The broader significance of the beatification is this: Historically, the church has recognized martyrs only if they were killed *in odium fidei*, meaning hatred of the faith. Puglisi, however, was recognized as a martyr who died *in odium virtutis et veritatis*, meaning hatred of virtue and truth.

That category has always existed in classical Christian theology. Over the centuries, writers have invoked it to explain why the church regards St. John the Baptist as a martyr even though he died not for faith in Christ but for criticizing Herod's immoral conduct. The Puglisi beatification means it's being applied to sainthood causes and could accommodate many similar situations.

To take a concrete example, recent days have heard cries from Catholic activists in Ukraine about the mounting threats they face for standing up for human rights and democracy. They're being increasingly hassled by security services, not for confessional motives, but rather the perceived threat they pose to the regime of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich.

Like those Ukrainians, many Christians today are menaced not for refusing to sacrifice to pagan gods or because they dissent from the creed of the prince, but due to moral and social choices rooted in their faith. That distinction doesn't make their suffering any less deserving of concern, and it cheapens their sacrifice to suggest it's not "religious" simply because their oppressors aren't motivated by explicitly religious concerns.

Driving that point home is the promise of Blessed Pino of Brancaccio.

2. Scalfari and the perils of projection

So far, Pope Francis has had four extended sessions with the press, and while all have been fascinating, none was more of a blockbuster than the text published by veteran Italian journalist and nonbeliever Eugenio Scalfari on Oct. 1. Among other things, the choice by Francis to sit down with one of Italy's most prominent secular intellectuals was seen as further confirmation of his commitment to outreach and dialogue.

Memorable lines from the Scalfari piece included the pope criticizing a "Vatican-centric" worldview, the assertion that some clergy suffer from "the leprosy of a royal court," and the mother of all sound bites, "God is not a Catholic." It also featured Francis describing a moment before he accepted the papacy when

he thought about refusing and exited the Sistine Chapel to pray in a small room off the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square.

That's where the fabric began to unravel, because cardinals who had been in the Sistine Chapel knew such a moment never happened (and, for that matter, that there is no small room off the balcony). As questions about the reliability of the text mounted, Scalfari acknowledged he had neither tape-recorded his conversation with Francis nor taken notes, so his piece was an *ex post facto* reconstruction. The Vatican quietly took the transcript of the interview off its website, basically conceding that it's impossible to know where Francis ends and Scalfari begins.

As it turns out, that wasn't Scalfari's last word on the pope.

On Dec. 29, he published a lengthy essay in *La Repubblica* presenting the astonishing claim that Francis, through his emphasis on freedom of conscience, effectively has "abolished sin" from Catholic teaching.

That claim inevitably brought a denial from the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, who called the idea of a pope taking a red pencil to a classic Christian doctrine such as sin "impertinent," then politely added that Scalfari "doesn't always seem comfortable in the biblical and theological field."

Lombardi might well have added that anyone who's listened to Francis rail against the treatment of the poor in the early 21st century shouldn't suffer from any confusion about whether this pope believes sin is real.

(Once again, Scalfari also stumbled over a small detail. He wrote that "a few days ago" Francis canonized St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, who was actually made a saint in 1622. Perhaps Scalfari confused Ignatius with St. Peter Faber, a Jesuit co-founder Francis did canonize Dec. 17, though Scalfari insisted in a brief clarification that he was using the term "canonize" in a metaphorical sense.)

Because the Francis papacy is rapidly evolving, it's fair game for observers to offer their own interpretations about where it's going and what it means. The lesson of the Scalfari story, however, is that sometimes, Rorschach-style psychological projection may come dressed up as analysis, even as quotation, so the rule of *caveat emptor* definitely applies.

1. Benedict the revolutionary

Despite images of Francis as a maverick, by far the single most revolutionary act committed by a pope in 2013 came from Benedict XVI in the form of his stunning decision to voluntarily renounce his office. Sometimes lost in the shuffle amid the frenzy over Francis is that Benedict was actually the prime mover in the drama.

Benedict, of course, never had much luck when it came to PR.

He came into office with a prefabricated narrative about being "God's Rottweiler" and "the Vatican's enforcer" and was never really able to shake it. In terms of public opinion, the difference between Benedict and Francis is perhaps best expressed this way: Under Benedict, people assumed that whatever they didn't like about the church was because of the pope; now, they tend to think it's in spite of the pope.

As a result, the tendency is to frame Benedict and Francis almost as matter and antimatter -- tradition vs. innovation, dogmatism vs. compassion, etc. Apart from the debatable merit of those perceptions, what they ignore is that Francis would not have happened without Benedict's decision to stand aside.

Equally notable is the way he's handled his departure. In his final address to the cardinals Feb. 28, Benedict pledged "unconditional reverence and obedience" to his successor, and he's held up his end of the deal. Other than a private letter he sent to an Italian atheist that was leaked by the recipient, Benedict has only been seen or heard in public when Francis has come calling or invited him to something.

Despite well-documented umbrage among some about the new direction under Francis, Benedict has done nothing to encourage a "loyal opposition" or to legitimize dissent from the new regime.

In effect, Benedict has gone from infallibility to near-invisibility, and entirely by his own choice. If that's not a "miracle of humility in an era of vanity," to invoke Elton John's *Vanity Fair* tribute to Francis back in June, it's hard to know what would be.

At a substantive level, several of the reforms for which Francis is drawing credit, including his cleanup of Vatican finances and his commitment to "zero tolerance" on sex abuse, amount to continuations of policies that began under Benedict.

Even if that weren't the case, the point remains that the "Francis effect" might have been lost to history without Benedict taking a step no pope had taken in 600 years -- and given the markedly different circumstances, one could argue it's a step no pope had ever taken in quite this way.

No question about it, Francis is shaking up the Catholic church and offering it a new lease on life. For the record, however, he wasn't the only maverick, the only revolutionary pope, of 2013.

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